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By Dave Williams

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ATLANTA — The fiscal crisis that hit Georgia's popular PeachCare for Kids last winter put leaders of the General Assembly's Republican majority in a tough position.

With the joint state-federal children's health insurance program about to run out of money, they were forced to turn for help to congressional Democrats, who had just taken control on Capitol Hill for the first time in a dozen years.

Among the Democrats in Georgia's congressional delegation they turned to was U.S. Rep. Sanford Bishop of Albany, who was stepping into an unfamiliar position of influence after serving in the minority party for 12 of his 14 years in the House.

He came through by setting up a meeting in Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office between a bipartisan group of state lawmakers and congressmen working on plugging the shortfall, said state Rep. Calvin Smyre, a longtime friend and political ally of Bishop who led the Georgia delegation. "Any time you can sit in the speaker's conference room and talk to a dozen members of Congress about an issue that faces the state, that's clout," said Smyre, D-Columbus.

Bishop, 60, elected to Congress in 1992 after 15 years in the General Assembly, enjoyed a degree of influence in Washington during those years of Republican rule.

As a member of the House Appropriations Committee, he was adept even as a minority Democrat at steering federal dollars to the 2nd Congressional District.

But now, Bishop is in an even better position. After Democrats captured control of Congress in last year's elections, he became a senior majority member of three Appropriations subcommittees with jurisdiction over federal spending for defense, military construction and agriculture, all vital to Southwest Georgia.

"The majority sets the agenda and makes the allocations," Bishop said recently during an interview in his Washington office. "It helps when I can speak to the (committee) chairman and know that person will want to help."

Democrat Defender

As the second longest-serving Democrat in Georgia's House delegation to Rep. John Lewis,

D-Atlanta, it has fallen to Bishop to defend his party's performance during its first year in power.

Republicans have taken to calling this a "do-nothing" Congress. Indeed, other than reforming some of the more lax ethics rules governing lawmakers, Democrats have succeeded only in raising the federal minimum wage.

The new majority has come up short of its goals a host of other issues, including getting U.S. troops out of Iraq and expanding the State Children's Health Insurance Program, the parent of PeachCare.

Bishop blames President Bush and congressional Republicans for the lack of progress.

After using his veto powers only once in six years when the GOP controlled Congress, the president this year has vetoed Democratic efforts to link war funding to a timetable for troop withdrawal and to expand eligibility for SCHIP.

Each time, Republicans have mustered enough votes in the House and Senate to prevent override attempts.

"The other side has assumed minority obstructionist status," Bishop said. "The only solution for that is for ... the president to decide he wants a different attitude, or we have to build a larger (congressional) majority."

Obama Backer

Bishop is doing his part to push for major change in the White House. He is serving as Georgia chairman for the 2008 presidential campaign of Sen. Barack Obama, D-III.

Thus far, Obama is faring surprisingly well in Georgia. While he is running second in polls of likely Democratic primary voters to former first lady Hillary Clinton, he has consistently been the top money-raiser in the Peach State, among both Republicans and Democrats.

Bishop said he sees similarities between Illinois and Georgia, two largely rural states dominated by a large urban area.

"He has done an excellent job representing Illinois' rural interests," Bishop said. "He has an abiding interest in rural economic development."

Bishop called Clinton, now a senator from New York, a "polarizing figure" in sharp contrast to Obama.

"Senator Obama is really trying to reach out and unify the country," he said.

It's no surprise that Bishop should be supporting Obama. Like the Illinois senator, he enjoys a reputation for seeking to work with Republicans.

For years, Bishop and Rep. Jack Kingston, R-Savannah, also elected in 1992, have formed a bipartisan tandem on the Appropriations panel, looking out for the interests of south Georgia.

“Sanford and I work on a lot of agriculture issues together quite frequently,” Kingston said. “We don’t have open animosity with the Democrats.”

Farm Advocate

While Bishop is not on the House Agriculture Committee, his spot on the Appropriations subcommittee on agriculture has made him on a major player on farm bills that come up for reauthorization every five years.

With Democrats taking power, he effectively has taken over Kingston’s role on the subcommittee.

“I don’t think we’ve lost anything,” said Gary Black, president of the Georgia Agribusiness Council. “(Bishop) is key in communicating to his colleagues that this is an important safety net. ... I don’t know that we could have had a stronger voice.”

Bishop’s primary contribution to the farm bill now before Congress is a provision in the legislation offering \$50 million to peanut farmers as an incentive to rotate their peanuts with other crops.

The money would replace handling and storage payments to peanut farmers, which have been yanked from the program.

“We had to come up with something that was more politically successful,” Bishop said. “It turned out to be an environmentally friendly approach.”

Smyre said Bishop’s longevity in Congress has been a result of his willingness and ability to run interference with the federal government on behalf of individual constituents.

Running as an African-American in a conservative district, he has won most of his races by huge majorities, particularly in recent elections.

After being re-elected without opposition in 2002, Bishop rolled up about two-thirds of the vote in 2004 and 2006 in crushing Republican challengers.

“The key word is ‘service,’ ” Smyre said. “That has been one of his successes regardless of whether he was in or out of power. ... I think he’s been a great student of that.”